



Australia's
Matisse
of the desert:
Kngwarreye's
artistic touch
(left); dealer
Don Holt
(right), helps
her by rotating
the canvas.



The Emily Industry

At the age of more than 80, this Australian painter is dazzling the world. But her life has become one of constant work and pressure, as family and dealers alike lay claim to Emily's gift.

by Jane Cadzow

EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE LOOKS UP from her painting and barks out an order: "I want a drink of lemon." Someone scurries to fetch it. What Emily wants, Emily gets. And why not? "She's hotter than any other artist in Australia," says Ace Bourke, co-director of the Hogarth Galleries in Sydney.

Believed to be in her 80s, Kngwarreye first picked up a paintbrush seven years ago and immediately produced images that dazzled dealers and collectors. Now she is such a star that she is known simply as "Emily" and her pictures, dubbed "Emilys", earn her thousands of dollars a day. "She's probably the highest paid woman in the country," says Adrian Newstead, director of Coe Aboriginal Art.

Dominic Maunsell, owner of Sydney's Barry Stern Gallery, credits Kngwarreye (pronounced Ung-wahr-ay) with keeping him in business through the recession. The rest of the art market may be in the doldrums but the demand for Aboriginal art continues to grow. And Kngwarreye's art is the most keenly sought of all. "I have Americans coming in here drawing, 'Gawtenny Emilys?'" Maunsell told a journalist back in 1992. Since then, the queue for her paintings has become a stampede and her prices have more than tripled. "The last few years have been triumphant for her," Maunsell says.

At first glance, Kngwarreye's is an exhilarating story. ▷

Photography by Greg Elms

How wonderful that an old lady whose address is Soakage Bore should so comprehensively conquer the art establishment, becoming the distant darling of the gallery set. After leading a hand-to-mouth existence in the central Australian desert for most of her long life, she now provides so handsomely for her extended family that she reportedly buys a car a week.

And her place in Australian art history seems assured. "We always were taught that Sid Nolan was our greatest colourist," says Maunsell, "and I think Emily is going to knock him off his pedestal ... Her colour combinations are rivetingly fabulous."

Associate Professor Terry Smith, director of the Power Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Sydney, suggests it is possible to see in her paintings "a kind of a magical reappearance of Matisse. Her sense of colour is very Matissean." Fascinated by the way Kngwarreye bridges the gap between the primitive and the contemporary, Smith says: "It's quite extraordinary. If you just looked at her as an abstract painter within the traditions of European modernism, you'd have to say that she was one of the major abstract painters of the 20th century."

No wonder her pictures are snapped up

Kngwarreye is not the only person who profits from the sale of both sides the pressure to keep working is considerable. "The

by private collectors and institutions. What did the Croatian President buy when in Melbourne recently? An Emily. What does the former director of the famous Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam hang in his study? An Emily. What was the backdrop when Prime Minister Paul Keating launched the Federal Government's Creative Nation policy at the National Gallery of Australia? A whole wall of Emilys.

Emilymania, is what it is and it has an ugly side. Swirling around the diminutive artist are rumours that she is being used. There's talk of imitation – the so-called "school of Emily" – and of outright forgery. "It's a real tale of intrigue," says Adrian Newstead, a long-time dealer in Aboriginal art. "There's so much unseemly stuff going on around this Emily business."

At the National Gallery of Australia, Aboriginal art curator Wally Caruana denies that the controversy surrounding Kngwarreye prompted a recent decision to postpone an exhibition of her painting. "We appreciate that all this stuff is going around about Emily and her work," Caruana says. "But I suppose she's not the first artist – nor the first Aboriginal artist – to have this happen to her."

Kngwarreye's home, Soakage Bore, is one of 14 outstations on Utopia, a 2,000 sq km Northern Territory cattle

property. About 250 km north-east of Alice Springs, Utopia straddles the country of the Anmatyerre and Alyawarre people, who have had title to it since a successful land claim in 1979.

Kngwarreye was born about 1910, several years before Europeans arrived in the area. She has told Anne Brody, curator of the Holmes à Court Collection, that she first saw a white person when she was a young girl. She and a friend were digging for yams when they saw a man on horseback – the first horse they had seen, too – and thought it was the devil, come to kill them. An Aboriginal man wearing an iron collar and chains was riding a second horse, tied to the first. Brody, who is writing a book about the artist, surmises that the white man was a police officer.

In 1992, some 70 years after that incident and just four years after she first applied acrylic to canvas, Kngwarreye travelled to Canberra to accept a \$110,000 Australian Artists Creative Fellowship. At the presentation, she dropped a bombshell, announcing that she intended to stop painting.

Janet and Donald Holt, who are major dealers in her work, tell me she was confused. Perhaps someone jokingly said, now

The Holts own Delmore Downs, the cattle station next to Utopia. Though they and the artist are neighbours, they come from different worlds. Kngwarreye may be making \$500,000 a year, according to some estimates, but she shows little interest in material possessions and sleeps in a bough shelter under the stars. Though everyone who knows her attests to her sharp intelligence, she has no formal education and little knowledge of the wider world.

The Holts are third-generation pastoralists, affluent and well-connected. Their children board at Geelong Grammar. Their homestead is large and comfortable, with a pool and tennis court. Seen below, as the charter plane from Alice Springs approaches the landing strip, Delmore Downs is an oasis in the red desert.

The Holts like to think they provide a sanctuary for Kngwarreye, who turns up at their place for days at a time, painting on a veranda and camping under a big blood wood gum. Utopia is in fact far from utopian, Janet says, and Soakage Bore is "a typical Aboriginal camp. Here, she's away from the hungry, yappy dogs and the loud ghetto-blasters and that sort of thing."

But the Holts' relationship with



you won't have to paint any more! "And she thought, 'In order to get this money, I've got to stop painting.'" Janet says. "She thought it was sort of like a pension."

The Holts insist Kngwarreye was eager to return to work after a short break. They say she said to them: "Don't tell that Keating."

But Anne Brody says Kngwarreye told her as early as 1990 that she wanted to retire because her art caused her too much worry. "As she said it, she actually drew her clenched hands to her chest. That's where the worry was," Brody remembers.

Kngwarreye is not the only person who profits from the sale of her pictures: her relatives and her dealers do too, and from both sides the pressure to keep working is considerable. "The reality is that it is virtually impossible for her to stop," Brody says.

Kngwarreye is viewed with suspicion by some city art dealers, though most of their competitors accuse them of nothing worse than paternalism.

"Their interest has been purely mercantile," says Kngwarreye's original Sydney agent, Christopher Hodges, owner of Utopia Art. Gabrielle Pizzi, formerly the Holts' Melbourne agent, has had a falling out with them and Kngwarreye's work will no longer be exhibited at her Flinders Lane gallery. "I have been concerned about Emily and her career for quite some time," Pizzi said recently on ABC Radio National's *Arts Today*.

At Delmore Downs is a shop where people from the district buy food, blankets, petrol and general supplies. Don Holt says Kngwarreye and others run up credit against their pension cheques,



Neighbours in Utopia: the Holts (left) at Delmore Downs. Emily (wearing blue) paints there and sleeps under the gum tree (above).

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'One of the major abstract painters of the 20th century': Emily's works include *Desert Power 1992* (far left) and *Untitled* (left). Inset, Alice Springs art dealer Rodney Gooch.

which are sent to the shop. This might appear to outsiders to be ethically questionable, says Sydney dealer Adrian Newstead, but in practice it probably suits everyone involved. Newstead, for one, is confident the Holts are fair and reasonable in their dealings with Kngwarreye and some 30 lesser-known Utopia artists they represent.

"The Aboriginal people would not be selling their work to Don Holt if they weren't getting exactly what they wanted out of the deal," he says. "Others see it as a parasitic relationship but I think it's symbiotic."

And the fact is, Kngwarreye has produced some of her most impressive work at Delmore Downs. Some of the finest pictures from the Holts' extensive personal collection were included in an exhibition

they mounted in Sydney in June and expect to stage later in Melbourne and Brisbane. The Sydney show was a public-relations triumph for the Holts, convincing even their critics that they must be doing something right. As Ace Bourke at the Hogarth Galleries puts it: "Masterpieces come under good relationships. They don't come under duress."

Donald Holt says expenses outweighed income for his first four years as a dealer in Kngwarreye's work. Even now, "We basically put any profits into buying other artists," he says. "It's quite a long-term investment."

But Holt is in an exuberant mood when I arrive at Delmore Downs. Talking about Kngwarreye's meteoric career, he says he sometimes has to pinch himself to make sure he is not dreaming. A week earlier,

one of her paintings sold at auction in Melbourne for \$28,000 – double the Sotheby's estimate and four times the price at which it last changed hands in 1991. The night of my visit, Holt gets a call from his new Melbourne agent, William Mora, reporting that he has just sold 10 major Emilys to a single collector. It is the biggest deal of Mora's life; he intends to celebrate. The Holts, jubilant too, dig out a bottle of Great Western.

Ironically, the reason Kngwarreye's work is so popular is that it is different from most Aboriginal art. Dominic Maunsell at Sydney's Barry Stern Gallery says even his conservative clients buy Emilys "because I think they can live with them rather better than with paintings of snakes and lizards and things like that".

At Canberra's Chapman Gallery, director Judith Behan says Kngwarreye defies pigeon-holing. "Europeans will come in looking for Australian art and they won't recognise her work as Aboriginal," Behan says. "What they do recognise is an artist with enormous power. It could be a work by [US artist] Frank Stella. It could be a work by an unknown impressionist. You can't quite put a finger on it ... And I think that's one of her main claims to fame."

Those who know Kngwarreye say she is a forceful, forthright woman whose individualism as a painter is a reflection of her non-conformist nature. Even her technique is unorthodox. In central desert art, ➤



WORK IN PROGRESS Ngwarreye's 'dump-dump' style breaks all the conventions of central desert art. She works the canvas with brisk, determined jabs and rapidly covers large areas with soft-edged blotches of colour – 'Her works just sing'.

colloquially known as "dot-dot", acrylic paint is painstakingly applied to a surface in small, neat spots of colour. The smaller and neater the better, is the usual rule. "If you can get a painting that looks like your computer spat it out, you can be bloody sure it will sell," says Alice Springs art dealer Rodney Gooch.

Ngwarreye's "dump-dump" style breaks all the conventions. Working the canvas with brisk, determined jabs, unconcernedly plunging the same stubby brush into different coloured paint pots, she rapidly covers large areas with soft-edged blotches. She is frail now and cannot move far without assistance, but with a brush in her hand, she is in command. "I'm sure her painting keeps her alive," says Donald Holt.

The day I meet her, she chews tobacco as she works. Wisps of silver hair escape from under a woollen hat, knitted in the colours of the Aboriginal flag. Her hands are gnarled, her face weathered from eight decades spent outdoors. ("The face!" sighs Dominic Maunsell at the Barry Stern Gallery. "The face is fabulous. I mean she *looks* like a genius.")

Ngwarreye speaks Anmatyerre and kriol, an Aboriginal/English dialect. The Holts understand enough to conduct rudimentary conversations but an English-speaking stranger like me can't do much more than exchange greetings. Besides, she does not want to be interrupted. An extremely prolific artist, she works so quickly and methodically that she has been known to complete a canvas in an hour. As Holt says, "When you see her paint, you really feel the magic."

Every now and again, she breaks her concentration long enough to glance up and issue an instruction. More paint. A cup of tea. A new brush. Her tone is good-humoured but imperious. The Holts jump to her bidding.

Her style has altered dramatically over the years. In her early paintings, fine tracks, or lines, were visible beneath fields

of quite tidy dots. "Those early canvases of Emily's were masterworks and everybody wanted them," Adrian Newstead says. "Today, if you could buy one – well, you can't buy them. No-one will sell them to you." But Newstead estimates they would cost up to \$70,000.

Each time her pictures change, the market reacts with consternation. Holt vividly recalls the fuss when the under-tracking that had been regarded as her signature disappeared. Dealers were phoning him in alarm, saying, "Where are the *lines*, Don? We can't see the *lines*." The same thing happened when the dotting became bigger and smudgier. "People took a long time to get used to it," says Holt, adding that it took considerable willpower to stick to his policy of non-interference. "We felt like saying to her, 'Would you please do some smaller dots? Everyone wants small dots.'"

For a while, Ngwarreye abandoned colour altogether, producing a series of black lines on a white background. Lately, she has been using ochre. "The fascinating thing about her is that she keeps reinventing herself," says Gabrielle Pizzi. "She's experimenting and exploring, coming up with really extraordinary work."

At the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery, Aboriginal art curator Margie West suggests that the changes are at least partly a result of failing eyesight. Adrian Newstead attributes them to market pressures. "Imagine you're 75 or 80 years of age and there's more and more demand being put on you to churn these things out faster and faster," he says.

"People often talk about the evolution of Emily's painting as having been a quest for ever more simple imagery, à la Matisse. They say [her later works] show a boldness, an assuredness, a bravado. I personally see them as being easy to execute."

One of the things discussed sotto voce in art circles is the variability of Ngwarreye's work. She produces

"everything from absolutely woeful, crappy paintings ... to absolute masterpieces", Newstead says. The Chapman Gallery's Judith Behan has no doubt that Ngwarreye is one of the finest living Australian artists – "but of course she does such terrible trash as well".

The other worry: there are just so many Emilys around. Utopia Art's Christopher Hodges became so concerned last year that he wrote to major collectors, curators and gallery directors expressing doubts about the authenticity of some paintings on the market. Hodges tells me he was going "to show after-show after show [seeing] works purporting to be Emily Ngwarreyes ... It would be physically impossible for anybody to have done it all."

The Holts are pretty certain of the existence of bogus Emilys. "We have heard stories of one or two people who may be copying Emily's work," Don says cautiously. "We just don't know what percentage of works on the market may be frauds."

Alice Springs dealer Rodney Gooch, long a friend and confidante of Ngwarreye, believes forgeries are only a small part of the problem. Far more numerous, he says, are paintings attributed to Ngwarreye by the market but produced with her approval by the artist's friends and relatives.

Gooch points out that painting is traditionally a communal activity in Aboriginal society. From an Aboriginal viewpoint, there is nothing wrong with Ngwarreye's authorising others to assist with her paintings. The best comparison is with a Renaissance workshop, where the master supervised the work of apprentices and maybe – or maybe not – gave pictures the finishing touch.

"Exactly the same thing is happening out here," Gooch says. "The fact is, Emily is an old woman. She doesn't want to paint all the time. And why should she, when all these kids will paint for her? She just gives the final nod."

Gooch supplies Emilys to Christopher ▷

Hodges, who says they are almost always of high quality. "Not every picture is a winner but she's got a good hit rate," says Hodges, adding that people who believe her painting to be inconsistent should keep in mind that "the work they are seeing is not necessarily hers".

In Melbourne, Gabrielle Pizzi is one of several dealers to tell me confidently that they can distinguish between "school of Emily" and the real thing. "I have seen an awful lot of work that looks quite similar but just doesn't have that creative spark," Pizzi says. "Her works just sing."

According to Fred Torres, an Adelaide art dealer fortunate enough to be one of Kngwarreye's kin, she no longer allows others to help with her painting. Nevertheless, he takes his video-camera when he visits Kngwarreye every few weeks, filming her at work so he can verify the authorship of the pictures.

The son of Kngwarreye's niece, Torres says the artist is "almost like a mother to me, it's that close. It's not just about the paintings. We go out hunting. She's that old, and she's there digging for the wild potato or collecting the bush plum or ordering me around to dig out the goanna holes for her."

Torres denies that Kngwarreye is tired of painting: "She loves it. She'd like to keep painting till the day she dies." As far as he can see, her happiness is marred by only one thing. "The problem she has with the whole deal is people fighting over her," he says. "That's the part that makes her feel ill."

Since the outbreak of Emilymania, there has been intermittent warfare in the art world. Gossip about forgery and deception does not improve the atmosphere but the main cause of hostilities between the dealers is rivalry for

the right to exhibit and sell Kngwarreye's work.

In Canberra, Judith Behan notes dryly that a lot of people seem to think they have a claim on Kngwarreye: "Chris Hodges believes that Emily belongs to him. Gabrielle Pizzi believed that Emily belonged to her. Don Holt certainly thinks Emily belongs to him."

"Because that's the way, traditionally, that you work in the art world. You find an artist, you promote her, you expect her to stay loyal. Every one of them, I gather, got a tremendous shock to find that somebody else was showing her down the road. The infighting has been very bitter."

Behan sympathises with Kngwarreye's refusal to tie herself to just one agent, or even one agent in each city. Exclusive representation is "likely to hold an artist back, particularly if they're very old," Behan says. "They've got to do as well as they possibly can for the short time that they have."

Gabrielle Pizzi says no fewer than five galleries in central Melbourne were showing Kngwarreye's work earlier this year - "a ridiculous state of affairs". But she does not condemn the artist's decision to play the field. "Why *not* have us running around getting into a lather?" Pizzi laughs. "They're really tough people in the desert. They've had to be, to survive."

Always adept at ceremonial body-painting, the women of Utopia had won a reputation as skilled batik-makers by the time they first painted on canvas in a communal experiment initiated by Rodney Gooch in 1988. The Holmes à Court Collection bought all 81 of the paintings and exhibited them in Sydney the following year. Since then, the remote cattle station has been a mecca for dealers sensing an opportunity to make a fast buck.

"All of a sudden there were up to six

dealers out there at one time, from all over the country," Gooch says. "From Melbourne to Cairns, they came." And Kngwarreye was always the main attraction. The way Janet Holt tells it, the artist is practically beating the dealers off with a stick these days: "I know she talks about shooing people away, or going bush to keep away from them."

Hank Ebes, proprietor of Melbourne's Aboriginal Gallery of Dreamings, decided some time ago "to employ agents who would do nothing but try to locate Emilys for me ... As you know, it has been a bit of a bunfight."

The dealer who controversially sold the Australian Government 15 John Gould bird prints for the Cabinet Room for \$66,000, Ebes waxes lyrical about Kngwarreye, comparing her with Renoir and Monet, and says his main concern is to ensure that he is buying the real McCoy. "Having owned several hundred Emilys, I can pretty well pick what is an Emily and what is not. But I still want the videotape," he says. "We hand out cameras and videotape recorders to the people who have access to her [so that] even when we're not there, we can record the painting."

Ebes pays on the spot for completed canvases. "Emily gets thousands of dollars a day," he says. "I've personally paid her up to \$4,800 for a single day's work." Michael Hollows, whose Aboriginal Desert Art Gallery has branches in Melbourne and Alice Springs, says he pays Kngwarreye \$2,500 to \$3,000 a day and just wishes he could get her to paint for him more often.

That she is old makes Kngwarreye's work all the more appealing to some dealers. "We see the value in Emily because she's going to snuff it," Hank Ebes says bluntly. "Why are these prices so high? ▸



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Because Emily is 85 and because we know that when she dies, they will jump to three times the value they were the day before she died."

Adrian Newstead says it is too simplistic to cast Kngwarreye and other Aboriginal artists as the helpless victims of greedy white art dealers. "She's not an idiot. She's a very smart old lady," he says. "She knows what her paintings are worth and she knows exactly what she can get out of each dealer for them." Margie West at the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery agrees. Kngwarreye is "an astute operator, politically and socially," West says. "I think she is utilising the system for her own advantage. To her credit, she is exploiting them as much as they're exploiting her."

Not that Kngwarreye has grown rich. Though she has no children of her own, "there are 80 or more people depending on her, taking the money from her," Adrian Newstead says. "All her money goes to buy cars for nephews and nieces and relatives, buy food, keep them in blankets. It just disappears."

Dr Chris Anderson, director of the South Australian Museum, says the Aboriginal system of instant wealth dispersal is typical of hunting and gathering cultures the world over. Nevertheless, it's not pretty to watch, says Utopia Art's Christopher Hodges: "If you're the major

provider in an Aboriginal community, you're expected to provide and *provide*. [Albert] Namatjira felt the crippling blows of it." Now it is Kngwarreye's turn.

Janet Holt says she gets angry on Kngwarreye's behalf but that when she protests against her buying yet another second-hand car for yet another relative, "She just tells me, 'That's all right. That's okay.'" The artist is a big customer at the Delmore Downs shop: "She'll basically give away blankets or torches or whatever every day," says Donald Holt, adding that her benevolence greatly enhances her status in her community: "She's like Jesus Christ and Santa Claus rolled into one." And Fred Torres, her great-nephew, says Kngwarreye enjoys being a benefactor. "She's got a great income. She just gives it out. She loves giving away stuff," Torres says.

Anyway, it is Kngwarreye's business what she does with her money, says Wally Caruana at the National Gallery of Australia: "It's surely the artists' prerogative to decide what they want to do, and how they want to deal with their art. It's difficult for outsiders to lay down the law."

The Chapman Gallery's Judith Behan points out that cars are important to people in isolated communities and that Kngwarreye's relatives are hardly living in luxury. "It's a very poor existence. If there's a bad season and they can't catch

enough food and they've already spent their sit-down money, you can stand beside Aboriginals and hear their tummies rumbling. And you see them shivering, out there in the cold."

Rodney Gooch likes to tell the story of Kngwarreye's tour of the Art Gallery of NSW. "I was pushing her around in a wheelchair and we had a group of the Friends of the Gallery with us, who were just absolutely blown out to meet this old bush woman," he says.

At one point, Kngwarreye started talking animatedly in Anmatyerre about one of her beloved dogs, sick when she left Soakage Bore. Gooch says everyone listened intently to this discourse, "trying to read into it what she was thinking about the art, and for the next 10 minutes it was all about taking her dog to the vet. You know, 'I don't want to look at your paintings. What about my dog?'"

On the same trip south they visited the national capital and Kngwarreye accepted her Creative Fellowship from the Prime Minister. Afterwards, they caught a plane to Alice Springs and Gooch drove Kngwarreye back to Utopia. When he let her out of the car, a dog fight was in progress. "She got in the middle with a stick and I said, 'See ya later.'"

Gooch smiles. "After Canberra, you take her home and you return her to the dirt. Where she lives." □



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